DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 565 CS 013 003

AUTHOR Burnett, Jeanie
TITLE Opening the World to Children: Using Books to Develop Problem-Solving Strategies.
PUB DATE 1997-04-11
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference of the Association for Childhood Education (Portland, OR, April 9-12, 1997).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; *Childrens Literature; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Elementary Education; Middle Schools; *Picture Books; Preschool Education; *Problem Solving; Reading Material Selection; *Student Behavior; Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Controversial Topics

ABSTRACT

This paper shows examples of thought-provoking picture and chapter books that can be used as springboards for discussing, analyzing, and solving authentic problems by pre-school through middle-level children in diverse settings. The paper begins with a description of a conference presentation which introduced participants to the notion of using books to develop problem-solving strategies. It then discusses specific examples of works in children's literature that deal with: everyday classroom problems (sharing, taking turns, etc.); difficult issues (violence and abuse); sensitive issues (stealing, lying, and cheating); and peace education issues (respecting others, their property, and their ideas). Contains 17 selected references. (RS)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 414 565

Opening the World to Children: Using Books to Develop Problem-solving Strategies. Session presentation at the Association for Childhood Education International's Annual International Conference and Exhibition "OPENING THE WORLD TO CHILDREN" Portland, Oregon, April 11, 1997.

Jeanie Burnett, Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA, USA

**Synopsis:** Examples of thought-provoking picture and chapter books used as springboards for discussing, analyzing and solving authentic problems by children of mixed ages in diverse settings was shared during this session.

**Description of the presentation:** Through books, the world opens up to children of all ages so they can learn to become effective problem solvers and decision-makers. Utilizing the messages inherent in picture and chapter books, children are introduced to ways in which others have attempted to, or have successfully solved problems. Knowing that people construct meaning when they read or listen to stories, problem situations in books serve as springboards for children to connect their own experiences with those of others. Open-ended discussions about problems encountered in books empower children from diverse backgrounds to brainstorm their own problem-solving ideas. From their wealth of collaborative suggestions, children can learn to select, analyze, evaluate and apply solutions in real-life situations.

Study conference participants were introduced to a collection of children's books designed to develop the problem-solving strategies of preschool through middle level students. They were shown examples of how children effectively use literature to negotiate various problems that surface in the schools: difficult

CS013003

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jeanie Burnett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

issues (violence and abuse), sensitive issues (stealing, lying and cheating), and peace education issues (learning to respect others or their property and sharing equipment). Using these books, creative and critical thinking skills applicable to everyday classroom problems (broken toys and equipment) were highlighted.

After sharing examples of books that prompted authentic problem-solving strategies that were field tested by culturally diverse children in rural and urban school environments, the conference participants were given scenarios from a large array of books in order to interact with each other in small group, problem-solving sessions. The participants were encouraged to discuss ways in which they will be able to use children's books meaningfully to develop problem solving strategies with students in their own classroom settings.

**Becoming Effective Problem Solvers and Decision Makers**

In her case study of a middle school student, Saunders (1997) described interactions of a student called Robin as she read novels and connected the readings to her own feelings in similar situations. Through a journal that she shared with her teacher, Robin explained how Dicey, the main character from Cynthia Voigt's (1982) *Dicey's Song* helped her understand personal problems in daily life. Through reading and then dialoguing about novels in their journals, students and teachers were able to generate new understanding about their ways of knowing. "I learned from Robin that our literacy journeys are never ending because we connect our experiences and continue to grow" (p.556). This example of the use of good literature to relate everyday problems to our classroom learning communities can open a new world to us teachers as we

seek ways to connect research about teaching to the implementation of problem-solving strategies. Interested participants may learn more about using literature with middle level students by reading further from Saunders (1997) in *Journal of adolescent & adult literacy*; Nancy Atwell (1987), *In the middle*; and Lucy Calkins (1991), *Living between the lines*, to name only a few important works. Other novels by Voigt that have been used with older readers are listed in the references.

**Major Categories of Problems**

Whenever we begin to think about problem solving, meaning authentic problems that are encountered in daily social life, not necessarily in specific content areas like math, science, and social studies, we have a tendency to try to categorize those problems into familiar areas. To help us focus upon good books as springboards for problem solving, let's use the following categories:

- Everyday classroom problems (sharing, taking turns, etc.)
- Difficult issues (violence and abuse)
- Sensitive issues (stealing, lying and cheating)
- Peace education issues (respecting others, their property, and their ideas)

**Books that Serve as Springboards for Solutions to Problems**

- Everyday classroom problems (sharing, taking turns, etc.)

*King of the playground* (Naylor, 1994), is a book that you can use with parents, as well as with children, to illustrate everyday problem-solving situations. In the situations illustrated in this book, a parent helps the child solve playground problems critically by analyzing the situations and deciding what to do. Kevin,

the main character of the book, is confronted by the playground bully, but instead of providing easy answers for his child, the father leads his son through the problem-solving thinking process by asking relevant questions. For example, when the bully threatens to bury Kevin in the sandbox, Kevin's father wonders aloud, "How long do you think it's going to take Sammy to dig that hole? ... and Kevin remembers how long it had taken him and his father to dig fence-post holes... and what would you be doing ... think I would kick the dirt back in ... ." So with thoughtful prompts from the adult, the child can learn to solve his own problems if, and when, he is confronted by a bully on the playground. All too often, adults try to give children easy, adult-like solutions to common problems. We have all heard parents and caregivers admonish, "Act like a man ... look the other way ... sticks and stones ... ." Wouldn't it be more developmentally appropriate for the children if the adults tried to encourage them to learn to solve their own problems in a reasonable manner? Perhaps we can use good books like this one to provide us with models that can be effective springboards for our own problem-solving behaviors.

In addition to critical solutions where we analyze situations and decide what to do, we can seek creative solutions for problems where we combine ideas in new ways, or produce original concepts. An example of creative problem solving that was prompted by a child and implemented by the teacher can be read in Schaefer's (1996) *The squiggle*. With the exquisite illustrations by Pier Morgan, we observe a preschool group of children outside for a walk with their teacher. As they ambled along, one little girl noticed a long, red ribbon on the ground.

Stepping away from the others, she retrieved the ribbon and pretended that it was a dragon, a wall, and other creative things. Instead of scolding the child, the teacher and other children paused to watch, then the teacher suggested that they all hold onto the creative ribbon as they continued their walk. Certainly, had the group been in a dangerous situation, the solution might not have been as creative for the little girl, but as an opportunity to observe creative problem-solving solutions posed by a child, *The squiggle* is a real treasure of a springboard book for teachers.

Older children face problems related to peer pressure that can be solved from a creative, as well as critical, point of view. Set in Australia, *Knitwits*, (Taylor, 1992) places the main character in a comical situation where his teacher and soccer coach teaches him to knit so that he can make a sweater as a special gift for the new baby his mother is expecting. Because no self-respecting ten-year-old male should be caught knitting, our hero must knit in secret places. Many humorous problem-solving situations present themselves throughout this book, and when his friends discover that he is knitting a sweater for the new baby, they are impressed and want to learn how to knit, too. Dialogue is quite authentic, and the English is Australian, which adds to the special charm of the book.

- Difficult issues (violence and abuse)

Everyone in the family looks forward to visits from "Uncle Willy", but his playful tickles, given in a very innocent and harmless manner, bother his nephew. After pretending to be sick so he can avoid his uncle, then having an honest discussion with his mother, the nephew is able to tell his uncle that the tickles

bother him. *Uncle Willy's Tickles* (Aboff, 1996), provides an excellent springboard for discussions about appropriate touching.

Appropriate behaviors for young people who are "in love" can be explored with dialogues about *Will you be my Brussels sprout?* (Frank, 1996). Older, middle school readers will be able to express their opinions about a variety of situations that could lead to sexually active behavior for the main characters of this sensitively written book. Although mild profanity is included in this book, the characters are very interesting and sensible.

- Sensitive issues (stealing, lying and cheating)

Hannah is at the middle school age where the opinion of friends is of utmost importance. At the urging of her new friends, she gets her ears pierced and her beautiful auburn hair bobbed. But will she be "a real friend" and turn her test paper ever so slightly so that her best friend can copy the answers to avoid failing and having to repeat the grade? *Hannah on her way* (Mills, 1991) is a "must read" for the problem solving theme.

Avi (1991), a favorite author of adolescents, has given us *Nothing but the truth.* Readers can respond in a variety of ways to the characters in this book because there are problems on many levels. Perhaps the main problem of lying by omission would be the most interesting focal point as a problem-solving springboard. Students would probably enjoy interpreting solutions to the problems in this book through readers' theater or dramatization.

- Peace education issues (respecting others, their property, and their ideas)

*Dear Oklahoma City, get well soon* (Myers and Ross 1996) shares letters and pictures from children to the residents of this city that has been traumatized by violence. In the hands of sensitive parents and teachers, this book can serve as a springboard for thinking about and discussing terroristic violence.

*The Araboolies of Liberty Street* (Swope, 1989) is another picture book that focuses upon accepting others and their basic rights. Age-old attitudes about respect and responsibility are addressed in ways that are sometimes hilarious, but mostly serious. After discussing the obvious problems and their solutions, sensitive parents and teachers may want to direct responses toward feelings about people who are fat/thin, young/old, and military/civilian.

**Age-old Problems: Respect and Responsibility**

Most problem situations revolve around basic core values of respect and responsibility. Familiar stories such as *Goldilocks & Three Bears, Beauty & the Beast* and *Little Red Hen* can serve as model springboards for discussions that will illustrate and employ problem-solving strategies.

In her book, *Problem solving safari—blocks*, Susan Miller (1997, p.6) lists the following steps to take with children when you are determining problems, developing solutions, and putting the solutions into action:

1. Identify – Determine and discuss the problem. It should be meaningful, interesting, and appropriate for your children.

2. Brainstorm – Encourage children to think about possible solutions. Listen to and respect all of their ideas. Keep a record of the solutions suggested in case the children want to try more than one.
3. Select – Help your children examine the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions and then choose one that seems workable.
4. Explore and Implement – Let children gather the necessary materials and resources and then try out the solution they decided upon.
5. Evaluate – With your children, observe and discuss whether the solution to the problem was successful. If appropriate, help the children think of changes they might want to make in the idea they tried, or encourage them to try other solutions. (Miller, 1997, p.6).

**Scenarios and Solutions**

As you survey additional books related to themes of problem-solving in critical and creative ways, you may want to seek books that will prompt further discussions about everyday classroom problems. In *Converting conflicts in preschool*, Beatty (1995) provides further discussion about classroom problems related to possession disputes, attention seeking, power struggles, personality clashes, access struggles, aggressive dramatic play, name calling, blaming conflicts, and damaging property. When you select books to use, remember your regular criteria for choosing good books. Select only those books that you can be genuinely enthusiastic about. As you read the book, think about how you will articulate your feelings about the topic. Before you begin sharing the book with children, think about the directions you want to take and the key focal points; but

remember to keep an open mind that will really listen to the voices of the children as they use problem solving strategies that will open their world.

**Selected References**


Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Avi. (1991), *Nothing but the truth.* New York: Orchard Books.

Barton, B. (1997). *The little red hen.* Mexico: Harper Collins Publishers.

Bishop, G. (1989). *The three little pigs.* New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Beatty, J. (1995). *Converting conflicts in preschool.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co.

Calkins, L. (1991). *Living between the lines.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Frank, L. (1996). *Will you be my Brussels sprout?* New York: Holiday House.

Miller, S. (1997), *Problem solving safari – blocks.* Everett, WA: Totline Books.

Mills, C. (1991). *Hannah on her way.* New York: Macmillan.

Myers, P. and Ross, J. (1996). *Dear Oklahoma City, get well soon.* New York: Walker and Company.

Naylor, P. (1994). *King of the playground.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Saunders, L. (1997). Lingering with Dicey: Robin's song. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy.* 40:7, 550—556.

Schaefer, C. (1996) *The squiggle.* New York: Crown Publishers.

Swope, S. (1989). *The Araboolies of Liberty Street.* New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.

Taylor, W. (1992). *Knitwits.* New York: Scholastic.

Voigt, C. (1982). *Dicey's song.* New York: Atheneum.

Voigt, C. (1981). *Homecoming.* New York: Fawcett Juniper.